

Introduction to Dzogchen and Buddha-Nature

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Introduction to Dzogchen and Buddha-Nature

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2019/07/11

Original content written for the Buddha-Nature Project.

Article

Article

With roots stretching back to the eighth century, the notion of *tathāgatagarbha* was initially introduced into the lexicon of what would become the Nyingma tradition through scholastic works that sought to reconcile the philosophy of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, as well as through tantric literature that presented advanced paradigms for the path and the immediacy of enlightenment. Over the centuries these two streams of influence wove themselves together to help form the basis of a unique synthesis of sūtra-based philosophical inquiry and tantric theories of praxis that would come to define the Nyingma approach. At the pinnacle of this system are the teachings of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, the supreme vantage to which all these intertwined approaches aspire. As such, this lofty perspective has a tendency to draw everything it encounters into its fold

and reimagine it in its own image. The relationship between Dzogchen and buddha-nature is one example of this trend, though one which is deeply intertwined with the development of the Nyingma view.

Early Sources and Formulations of the Nyingma View

Unlike the Kagyu tradition that can trace transmission lineages for both the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the Mahāmudrā teachings through the single individual of **Maitrīpa**, the Nyingma tradition has a much more convoluted relationship with buddha-nature, which it often presents as a synonym for its own technical terms or concepts related to the ground or basis upon which its theories of soteriology are founded. This is especially true in the context of the Dzogchen teachings, which in their earliest iteration often closely paralleled the Mahāmudrā teachings that **Gampopa** is famously reported to have claimed had the *Ratnagotravibhāga* as their source. However, even though the Nyingma and their Dzogchen teachings don't have a direct correlation with what might be considered the main introduction of the buddha-nature theory to Tibet via the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the

Nyingma have their own history of engagement with this concept that in some ways predates it and in other ways absorbed it.

What we consider the earliest formation of the Nyingma tradition might more accurately be considered the foundation or base of Tibetan Buddhism in general, as the notion of it being a distinct school of thought only truly developed once the so-called Sarma traditions began to coalesce in the tenth and eleventh centuries as a counterpoint to the previously established forms of Buddhism that had been gestating in Tibet since the eighth century. Thus this proto-Nyingma tradition encompassed all of the forms of Buddhism that had been introduced via the activities of those involved in the early dissemination of the teachings (*bstan pa snga dar*). Among the numerous Indian scholars that were invited to Tibet during this period, two of the most prominent figures were Śāntarakṣita, the abbot of Tibet's first monastery Samye, and his student Kamalaśīla, who is eulogized in the Tibetan tradition for his participation in the famed Samye Debate, in which he is said to have bested his Chinese rival Heshang Moheyan and thus paved the way for the adoption of primarily Indian forms of

Buddhism by royal decree. And though the historicity of the Tibetan accounts of the debate are considered highly suspect by modern scholars, the influence of these two figures on the fledgling Tibetan tradition is widely accepted. Through his compositions such as the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and especially the *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, Śāntarakṣita introduced to Tibet a philosophy that has been characterized as a Yogācāra-Madhyamaka synthesis. In turn, Kamalaśīla wrote commentaries on both of those works, as well as his renowned trilogy on the stages of meditation titled *Bhāvanākrama*. However, as pointed out by Ruegg, he also introduced the concept of tathāgatagarbha in his expansive work the *Madhyamakāloka*.^[1] This work was translated by Tibetan scholar Yeshe De (Ye shes sde, c. 8th–9th century) who also composed a work on distinguishing philosophical views entitled the *Lta ba'i khyed par*, which has been discussed at length by David Higgins.^[2] What is particularly pertinent about this text is Yeshe De's description of tathāgatagarbha as occurring in two distinct phases, as the impure mind of sentient beings in the form of the *ālayavijñāna*, which he references with the shorthand Tibetan form of *kun gzhi*, and as the natural spiritual disposition (*rigs*) of the sentient beings that when utterly pure or clarified

is the *dharmakāya*, which he also refers to as the root (*rtsa*) and the ground (*gzhi*).^[3] Therefore, in the work of **Yeshe De**, which is perhaps the first indigenous Tibetan composition on Mahāyāna philosophy, we see the author set forth a disclosure model of buddha-nature in which it is naturally present in the minds of beings but needs to be brought forth through practices that remove that which obscures it. Moreover, the equation of the undefiled tathāgatagarbha with the dharmakāya as the ground or basis upon which such purification is possible sets the stage for the way later Nyingma scholars would address these issues.

Of course, the early dissemination period also saw the introduction of tantra into the Tibetan milieu, and these works also mention tathāgatagarbha, often in the form of **sugatagarbha (bde gshegs snying po)*, as it is commonly iterated among the Nyingma. While these mentions are exceedingly brief, they come from such mainstays of the Nyingma tantric canon as the **Guhyagarbha Tantra* and the *Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*, which came to be considered by this school as the root tantras of the Mahāyoga and Anuyoga classes respectively.^[4] Though, while these tantras are thus distinguished from Atiyoga, i.e., Dzogchen proper, at

this early stage there was considerable overlap between these categories, especially in terms of exegesis, in that it is common to see supporting citations from both of these works in early Dzogchen commentarial literature. Furthermore, the Atiyoga perspective can be applied to their exegesis as well, as is the case with **Padmasambhava's** *Garland of Views* (*Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*),^[5] which consists of pith instructions on the **Guhyagarbha* but is traditionally regarded as a Dzogchen teaching. Though references to buddha-nature-related terms also appear in examples of early Dzogchen scriptural literature, such as the *Srog gi 'khor lo* and *Byang chub sems bde ba'i myu gu*.^[6] Thus Tibetan authors of the time, writing from this perspective, also mention **sugatagarbha*, most notably being that of **Nyenchen Palyang** (Gnyan chen dpal dbyangs) in his *Thabs shes sgron ma* and **Nupchen Sangye Yeshe** (Gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes) in his *Bsam gtan mig sgron*, as well as in his commentary on the *Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*. As for the former reference, Higgins translates the relevant passage from Palyang as follows:

**sugatagarbha*, the nature of mind, appears in each and every mind-stream that grasps a 'self' among the

long-deluded sentient beings while its very nature remains one with the dharmakāya of the victorious ones.^[7]

Here, again, we see a similar dichotomy as we saw in the writing of **Yeshe De**, in which buddha-nature can exist in deluded minds but is nevertheless pure in terms of its nature. Though in relation to Dzogchen, the fact that he equates *sugatagarbha with the nature of mind is noteworthy. As for Nupchen's use of this term, it is mentioned as one of many synonyms, of which Higgins singles out **bodhigarbha* (*byang chub snying po/ snying po byang chub*) and its variations as being the preferred nomenclature of Nupchen and later **Rongzompa** (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1042-1136), which he speculates is "because of their kinship with the all-important concept *bodhicitta* and because of the tantric/rDzogs chen identification of buddha nature with this *bodhicitta*."^[8]

Now, all of the above usages of buddha-nature-related terms predate **Ngok Lotsāwa**'s translation of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*. With the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka stemming from **Śāntarakṣita** and his doctrinal heirs, on the one hand, and the introduction of Indian tantric literature and the development of a

Tibetan technical terminology related to their exegesis, on the other, we see the roots of a distinct Nyingma approach to buddha-nature theory already developing in the centuries before the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* captured the Tibetan scholastic imagination. However, one of the striking differences is that early Nyingma authors tended to make use of these terms as a support for issues more central to their doctrinal theses rather than trying to explicate buddha-nature itself.

Therefore, we see terms like **sugatagarbha* being equated with the ground in the context of the tantric notions of the three continuities of the ground, path, and fruition, and we see words like **bodhigarbha* acting as a stand-in for Dzogchen terms referencing the nature of mind. And so their usage is largely in support of presenting a soteriological model based on these specific approaches, in which enlightenment is not something newly acquired but something already naturally present. On the other hand, terms like *kun gzhi* were eventually rebranded to fit their own criteria. And so what was once used as shorthand for the ālayavijñāna by [Yeshe De](#) later came to reference a pure universal basis, read literally as the "ground-of-all," which is at times synonymous with the

dharmakāya that **Yeshe De** would have considered its opposite.

Once we get to the latter half of the eleventh century and the work of **Rongzompa**, a contemporary of **Ngok Lotsāwa**'s who is arguably the most apt representative of the culmination of this early period, we get the following explanation:

In the higher vehicles, the characteristic of the ālaya [*kun gzhi*] is that it is the primordial awakened mind [*bodhicitta*]. The afflictions and the imprints that lead to birth in the lower realms are adventitious obscurations, like oxide covering gold, or dirt covering a precious jewel. Although the buddha qualities are temporarily hidden, their nature is not defiled.^[9]

This is quite typical of the writings of **Rongzompa**, in which we see the widespread use of the term **bodhigarbha*, which he places in apposition to the Dzogchen understanding of bodhicitta that, as evidenced in the above quote, could easily be read as a synonym for buddha-nature. As he states in his *Theg pa chen po'i tshul la 'jug pa*,

...consider the nature of bodhicitta: all phenomena, outer and inner, appearance and existence, are

nondual bodhicitta—the primordial nature of the quintessence of awakening (**bodhigarbha*, *snying po byang chub*) is primordially perfected (*yas nas sangs rgyas ba*), not something refined and corrected through a path, and is accomplished spontaneously, without effort. [10]

In this passage we see a form of buddha-nature theory set entirely within the context of early Dzogchen. Though that is not to say Rongzompa was unaware of other interpretations or models. In response to the famous passage from the **Guhyagarbha Tantra*,

Ema ho, from the **sugatagarbha* one's own discursive thinking manifests due to karma, [11]

Rongzom states in his commentary,

...the term **sugatagarbha* is widely known in ordinary [scriptures] which claim that all sentient beings possess the cause of awakening [and] are endowed with the seed of incorruptibility. According to the profound [scriptures], it is called the ‘quintessence of awakening’ (**bodhigarbha*) because the very nature of mind is awakening. Thus, because this is so, it may appear as bondage and by virtue of it[s presence], it

may appear as freedom. It has been taught because one has not [yet] seen the reality (*don*) wherein bondage and freedom do not exist."^[12]

Here, we see **Rongzompa** acknowledging other interpretations of buddha-nature but giving precedent to a more profound take on this term. Therefore, at roughly the same time that **Ngok Lotsāwa** and his compatriot **Tsen Khawoche** were importing lineages of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* from their mutual teacher **Sajjana**, **Rongzompa** was already developing a Nyingma soteriological model that was in many ways analogous to buddha-nature theory but was sourced from tantric and Dzogchen literature and relied heavily on appropriated terminology from earlier Yogācāra-Madhyamaka thinkers in its exegetical style.

Unity in the Nyingma View and the Assimilation of Buddha-Nature as a Support for the Exposition of Dzogchen

In terms of the Nyingma view, the work of creating a unified theory that plotted a course from the philosophy of the Mahāyāna, through tantra, and up

until the Dzogchen teachings, which began with **Rongzompa**, was taken up in earnest by **Longchenpa** and found culmination in the works of **Mipam Gyatso**. Though they lived centuries removed in eras that bore little resemblance to each other, these three prolific scholar-yogis are considered by modern Nyingmapas to be the architects of the Nyingma view and are often depicted as successors in their mutual endeavor to systematize the unique perspective of the Nyingma. Though under close scrutiny their individual views differed considerably, what they had in common was a top-down approach to explicating the view that sought to reconcile lower approaches in light of the Dzogchen teachings and thus establish their supremacy.

Though less of a preoccupation for **Rongzom**, for **Longchenpa**, and especially for **Mipam**, this meant finding common ground between the philosophical approach of the Madhyamaka and the experiential understanding of the Dzogchen view. To this end, buddha-nature was often invoked in order to bridge this divide, as Nyingma scholars tended to hold both the emptiness taught in the second turning of the *dharmacakra* and the existence of the luminosity of innate enlightened qualities taught in the third to be

definitive teachings of the Buddha. And though, in terms of Madhyamaka, the Nyingmapa experienced an evolution of preference from the Yogācāra-[Svātantrika]-Madhyamaka, introduced in the early dissemination era, toward the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, introduced during the later dissemination era with the translation of the works of **Candrakīrti**, these two competing philosophical positions would eventually give way to the notion of the Great Middle Way, or Mahāmadhyamaka (*dbu ma chen po*). As the twentieth-century Nyingma scholar **Bötrul Dongak Tenpai Nyima** characterizes it,

In the tradition of the Great Middle Way, in accord with the meaning of the viewpoint of sūtras such as the *Akṣayamatisūtra*, and great śāstras such as the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, the middle Word is accepted as the definitive meaning; and in accord with the meaning of the viewpoint of sūtras such as the *Dhāraṇīśvararāja*, and great śāstras such as the *Uttaratantra*, sūtras of the last wheel that teach Buddha-nature are accepted as the definitive meaning—the meaning of the viewpoint within a single essential point, without contradiction, is the general [way of] Nyingma scriptures. ^[13]

Though clearly influenced by [Dölpopa](#) and his "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) position, which he also referred to by this same name, for the Nyingma the Great Madhyamaka came to be an analytic companion to the direct approach of the Dzogchen teachings—two complimentary methods for arriving at the same destination. As Mipam states in his *Beacon of Certainty* (*Nges shes sgron me*),

The unelaborated Great Madhyamaka and the luminous Great Perfection, these two, Are given different names, but their meaning is the same.

There is no view higher than that. [\[14\]](#)

Or, as the late [Kangyur Rinpoche](#) puts it,

In the *Sutra Requested by King Dharanishvara* and in the *Mahaparinirvanasutra*, the Buddha taught in extensive detail that the ultimate nature, as set forth in the second turning of the Dharma wheel, dwells naturally in all beings as the sugatagarbha. In this way, he expounded for those of sharp capacity the exact nature of knowledge objects. The essence of the teachings of the second and third turnings is the fundamental nature of all phenomena: profound,

peaceful, beyond conceptual construction, and endowed with the character of luminosity. And after distinguishing the ordinary mind (that is, ordinary states of consciousness) from primordial wisdom, this fundamental nature is set forth as the naked condition of this same primordial wisdom. This teaching is known as the Great Perfection, and is ultimately identical with the Great Madhyamaka of union (the subtle inner Madhyamaka). The only difference between them lies in the manner of their exposition.

[15]

Here we see that an essential feature of the Nyingma approach is the reconciliation of the second and third turnings of the dharmacakra as the unification of emptiness and luminosity. Furthermore, this unity approached as the culmination of philosophical inquiry, which is practiced as the Great Madhyamaka, is equated with the culmination of tantric practice as the Great Perfection in terms of their ultimate import. Though, basically, the Great Madhyamaka of the Nyingma was a revival of the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka, albeit an updated version crafted to account for the seismic shifts that had occurred within the Tibetan philosophical terrain over the course of hundreds of years. Hence, this sense of

unity became a vehicle for Nyingma scholars to posit an ultimate truth that was very much in line with the perspective of "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) without abandoning their predilection for the sophisticated reasoning of **Candrakīrti**'s brand of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka as the pinnacle of the view of "self-emptiness" (*rang stong*). Therefore, these two views were seen as complimentary, or even crucial, counterpoints that fended off potential deviations into the extreme views of nihilism and eternalism, as well as supports for establishing the second and third turnings on equal footing. As **Mipam** states in his *Lion's Roar: Exposition of Buddha-Nature*,

Even though the reasoning that analyzes the ultimate establishes the emptiness of all phenomena, it does not negate the qualities of [Buddha-]nature because although the sublime qualities exist, they are also claimed to be essentially empty. Therefore, the meaning demonstrated by the middle wheel that all the phenomena of thorough affliction and complete purification are taught to be empty is established as such because Buddha-nature is also the nature of emptiness. However, since this teaching of [Buddha-]nature—characterized as neither conjoined

with nor separable from the appearances of the empty-natured exalted body and wisdom—is the viewpoint of the definitive meaning sūtras of the last wheel, then by merely this fact it is superior to the middle wheel. Although the meaning of the last wheel is praised in the sūtras and commentaries, [this does] not [refer to] everything in the last wheel, but is spoken in this way concerning the definitive meaning position of demonstrating the [Buddha-]nature. This can be clearly ascertained as such through other sūtras such as those that teach the basic element of heritage through the metaphor of cleansing a jewel. Therefore, the emptiness taught in the middle wheel and the exalted body and wisdom taught in the last wheel should be integrated as a unity of emptiness and appearance. Without dividing or excluding the definitive meaning subject matters of the middle and last wheels, both should be held to be the definitive meaning in the way of just this assertion by the omniscient Longchen Rapjam.

By maintaining both of these [wheels] to be the definitive meaning, there is not only no contradiction that one [wheel] must be held as the provisional meaning, but having integrated them, there is the essential point of the quintessential instructions of the

Vajrayāna through the Buddha-nature as such taken as the meaning of the causal continuum (*rgyu rgyud*). Therefore, you should know how the teachings of the Buddha converge on this single essential point and that this consummate meaning is the single viewpoint of the Sublime Ones such as **Nāgārjuna** and **Asaṅga**, for it can be clearly understood through [Nāgārjuna's] *Dharmadhātustotra*, *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, etc., and [Asaṅga's] commentary on the *Uttaratantra* and so forth.^[16]

This brings us back to the theory of buddha-nature and the way in which it was assimilated by the Nyingma tradition as a common ground upon which its notions of unity were predicated. Though the equation of buddha-nature with the universal basis (*kun gzhi*), taken in its ultimate sense, dates back to the time of **Rongzompa**, in the wake of the translation of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* Nyingma scholars began to appropriate the treatise in support of its own positions. One potential reason for doing so was that it provided an accepted Indian source, whereas most of the early translation tantras the Nyingma took as canonical were viewed as apocryphal by later traditions. On the other hand, the treatise also provided Nyingma

scholars the opportunity to present their unique position in terms of the common philosophical language of the times. Hence, rather than spending their time arguing over what is or isn't an authoritative scripture, they could present their ideas within the confines of established norms. This is especially evident in the work of **Longchenpa**, who cites extensively from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in his writings on Dzogchen, often using buddha-nature as an entryway into discussions of Dzogchen proper. Though in Dzogchen literature, in general, buddha-nature, usually in the form of *bde gshegs snying po* (*sugatagarbha), is commonly treated as an umbrella term that is utilized as a synonym for several key technical terms and concepts. Hence, we see it used interchangeably with the ground (*gzhi*), the nature of mind (*sems nyid*), the dharmakāya (*chos sku*), suchness (*de bzhin*), nature of phenomena (*chos nyid*), awareness (*rig pa*), and so on. Therefore, these two trends of either utilizing buddha-nature as a method of introducing aspects of the Dzogchen teachings from the perspective of the lower vehicles, on the one hand, or appropriating the term as a religious *lingua franca* to show correlation with Dzogchen technical terms, on

the other, are quite typical of the way buddha-nature appears within Dzogchen literature.

In summary, within the Nyingma tradition, the concept of buddha-nature, though never truly featured as a central tenet, has existed on the periphery of major doctrinal developments since the tradition's early inception. It is but one example of a long-standing trend among Nyingma scholars to assimilate philosophical terms. Especially in regards to the Dzogchen teachings, common terms such as *ālaya* (*kun gzhi*) and *bodhicitta* (*byang chub sems*) were elevated from their ordinary usage to signify grand concepts related to a pure basis which is the ultimate nature or essence of the mind. Likewise, much of this appropriation was in service of presenting a soteriology based on the idea of primordial enlightenment—that buddhahood is something that is unmasked rather than produced anew. Therefore, once buddha-nature theory burst onto the Tibetan scene with the translation of the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, there were already considerable parallels between the soteriological model centered around buddha-nature presented in the treatise and the Nyingma model centered around notions of self-emergent (*rang byung*)

or self-cognizing (*rang rig*) primordial wisdom (*ye shes*) and the nature of mind. The Nyingma even utilized proto-buddha-nature language with terms like **bodhigarbha* (*byang chub snyingpo*, *snying po byang chub*) that were easily superseded by the more recognizable term **sugatagarbha* (*bde gshegs snying po*). Thus the tradition was quick to adopt and adapt features of buddha-nature theory that served its needs. This process of assimilation is evident throughout the tradition, from philosophical discourse to yogic praxis, though it is especially pronounced in the exposition of the Dzogchen teachings, in which it became an indelible part of this genre's unique lexicon.

Further Reading

[Dudjom Rinpoche on Great Madhyamaka](#)

[Longchenpa on Buddha-Nature in the *Great Chariot*, a commentary on *Finding Rest in the Nature of Mind*](#)

[Buddha-Nature in the Longchen Nyingtig](#)

[Dudjom Lingpa's Usage of Buddha-Nature in *Buddhahood Without Meditation*, with Commentary by Sera Khandro](#)

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Notes

1. [David Seyfort Ruegg](#), *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), 95n308.
2. [Higgins, David](#). *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction Between Dualistic Mind (sems) and Primordial Knowing (ye shes)*. (Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2013), 160–63.
3. *Ibid.*, 161–62.
4. For the actual references, see [Wangchuk, Dorji](#). "The rÑiñ-ma Interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 48, (2005): 179n22 and 23.
5. For a translation of this text alongside the Tibetan see [Padmasambhava](#) and [Jamgön Mipham](#). *A Garland of Views: A Guide to View, Meditation, and Result in the Nine Vehicles*. Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. (Boston: Shambhala, 2015), 1–27.
6. See Wangchuk, "The rÑiñ-ma Interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory," 179n24 and Higgins, *The*

Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet, 174n441 and 442.

7. Higgins, *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet*, 174.
8. Ibid., 176.
9. van Schaik, Sam. *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Approaches to Dzogchen Practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingtig*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 63. The bracketed terms have been added for sake of clarity.
10. Sur, Dominic, trans. *Entering the Way of the Great Vehicle: Dzogchen as the Culmination of the Mahāyāna*. (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2017), 129.
11. */e ma'o bde gshegs snying po las/ rang gi rnam rtog las kyis sprul/*. This passage often appears with a variation of the final verb, such as in Longchenpa's *Shing rta chen mo* where it is written, */e ma'o bde gshegs snying po las/ rang gi rnam rtog las kyis 'khrul/*. "Ema-o! Through the working of one's thoughts, One strays from the sugatagarbha". (*Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, 2017, 236)
12. Higgins, *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet*, 177–78.

3. Duckworth, Douglas S. *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 25.
4. *spros bral dbu ma chen po dang / 'od gsal rdzogs pa chen po gnyis/ don gcig ming gi rnam grangs te/ de las lhag pa'i lta ba med/*. For an alternative translation, see Pettit, John W., and Mi pham rgya mtsho. *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999), 237.
5. 'Jigs med gling pa and Kangyur Rinpoche. *Treasury of Precious Qualities: The Rain of Joy. Book Two: Vajrayana and the Great Perfection*. Translated by Padmakara Translation Group. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013), 231.
6. Duckworth, Douglas S. *Mipam on Buddha-Nature*. 164–65.

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